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Mandatory Education: Sharing the Story of Slavery at the Whitney Plantation Museum

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Mandatory Education: Sharing the Story of Slavery at the Whitney Plantation Museum

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Report

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Texas at Austin

May 2018

Abstract

Mandatory Education: Sharing the Story of Slavery at the Whitney Plantation Museum

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2018

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The Whitney Plantation, recently opened as a museum in Wallace, Louisiana, represents a new attempt to educate the public about the history of American slavery. The site, marketed as a museum of slavery, consists of exhibitions, memorials, and both original and reconstructed buildings. I argue that the Whitney Plantation Museum engages in three distinct projects on its site—that of a museum of slavery, a memorial to slavery, and as a plantation museum. Using the museum's website, tours, exhibitions, and marketing material, I explore these three projects, commenting on the efficacy of each in regard to the Whitney's larger goals to educate the public on the history of slavery. I argue that the Whitney's effectiveness as a site of slavery and public history lies in its role as a plantation museum, engaging in a very different project to other plantation sites located in the same area. While the three projects competing for focus at the Whitney serve to undermine some of its good intentions, it is in the museums' role as a unique version of a plantation museum that the Whitney finds its place as a new and vital addition to a wider American conception of public history and slavery.

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Introduction

On the Whitney Plantation's website, a quote from New Orleans' mayor Mitch Landrieu hovers over images of the site's buildings and memorials. It reads, "Go on in. You have to go inside. When you walk in that space you can't deny what happened to these people. You can feel it, touch it, smell it."[1] The Whitney Plantation Museum, which opened its doors in 2014, provides a visceral experience of the history of enslavement, alluded to in this endorsement by Mayor Landrieu. Established by German immigrants in 1752, the site was originally used for the farming of indigo, before being converted into a sugar plantation in the early 1800s. John Cummings, the current owner and founder of the Whitney Plantation Museum, bought the site in 1999, and spent close to fifteen years constructing it into what he calls "The First Slavery Museum in America."[2]

The Whitney Plantation is located in "New Orleans Plantation Country," one of ten plantations arranged along the Mississippi River in between the cities of Baton Rouge and New Orleans.[3] The Whitney is the only plantation museum dedicated to presenting the history of slavery from the perspective of those enslaved. The site includes exhibition space to inform visitors about the history of the slave trade, resistance by those enslaved, and the particular labor involved with planting and processing sugar cane. There are also memorials to the enslaved, including one memorial honoring those enslaved on the Whitney Plantation and one large monument to the thousands of people documented in Gwendolyn Midlo Hall's "Louisiana Slave

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[1] "Home," Whitney Plantation, accessed April 15, 2018, http://whitneyplantation.com.
[2] David Amsden, "Building the First Slavery Museum in America," *New York Times*, February 26, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/01/magazine/building-the-first-slave-museum-in-america.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&module=photo-spot-region&region=top-news&WT.nav=top-news&_r=0.
[3] "The Most Celebrated Louisiana Plantations," New Orleans Plantation Country, accessed April 15, 2018, http://neworleansplantationcountry.com/plantations.

Database."[4] In addition, numerous buildings have been restored on the property, including slave cabins, the original kitchen, and the Big House, all of which are framed from the perspective of the enslaved during guided tours of the site.

History of the Whitney Plantation (Habitation Haydel)

Ambroise Heidel, who was born in Germany and came to Louisiana with his family in 1721, originally settled the land that is now considered the Whitney Plantation in 1752. The land is located on the west bank of the Mississippi River, in the area known as the German Coast, though the colony at that time belonged to the French. Heidel successfully farmed indigo, a fairly popular crop at the time, utilizing the labor of twenty enslaved men and women. When Ambroise Heidel died around 1770, the land passed on to his son, Jean Jacques Haydel, Sr. who transformed the plantation from the production of indigo to the production of sugar. According to the Whitney Plantation website, Jean Jacques Haydel, Sr. was responsible for the construction of the main house, which remains on the property today.[5] After Jean Jacques Haydel, Sr. died, the property was passed on to his sons, Jean Jacques Haydel, Jr. and Jean Francois Marcellin Haydel, who ran the plantation together from 1820 to 1839, when the two filed to legally partition the property, including the enslaved men and women. The enslaved people who were divided up as part of the property severance are honored with a memorial on the current site of the Whitney Plantation. After Marcellin Haydel passed, his widow, Marie Azélie Haydel bought the plantation and turned it into a huge agro-industrial unit, producing up to 407,000 pounds of sugar during one grinding season. Before the Civil War, the plantation was sold to Bradish Johnson of New York, who named the property after his grandson, Harry Whitney. After

[4] The Louisiana Slave Database was built by Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, a historian who specializes in the history of slavery in Louisiana. The database was compiled over fifteen years and is now available online. It includes the names of over 100,000 individuals enslaved in Louisiana from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.
[5] "The Whitney Plantation," Whitney Plantation, accessed April 28, 2017, http://whitneyplantation.com/history.html.

Johnson died, it was sold to Pierre Edourd St. Martin and Theophile Perret. They kept it in their family until it was sold again in 1946 to Alfred Mason Barnes, who would in turn sell it to the Formosa Plastics Corporation in 1990.

Formosa Plastics Corporation planned to build a large wood pulp and rayon plant on the property but met opposition by local residents and environmental activists. The protestors argued that the plant would have polluted the Mississippi River, wreaking more environmental havoc in an area already devastated by pollution.[6] The Whitney is located in Wallace, Louisiana, in an area Robert Bullard has referred to as "Cancer Alley." When Bullard published his first book on environmental justice, *Dumping in Dixie: Rae, Class, and Environmental Quality*, in 1994, he found that there were 125 companies manufacturing environmental hazards like fertilizers, gasoline, paints, and plastics in the Lower Mississippi River area.[7] The area has been marked by pollution and contamination, but there has also been strong resistance by local community members and environmental activists, who halted the construction of the Formosa Plant. The company canceled the project in 1992 and sold the property to John Cummings in 1999.[8]

John Cummings

Many interviews with John Cummings were published in local and national newspapers in anticipation of the opening of the Whitney Plantation Museum in late 2014. He also wrote a number of articles, articulating what he perceived as a cultural ignorance about the history of enslavement in America, particularly among white Southerners. Cummings writes, "As a lifelong Southerner, I realized that there had been a glaring omission in my education of the nation's history, and that I was not alone in my ignorance. While everyone knows that slavery existed in

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[6] Frances Frank Marcus, "Wallace Journal; A Town Loses Jobs, Then Celebrates," *New York Times*, October 26, 1992, https://www.nytimes.com/1992/10/26/us/wallace-journal-a-town-loses-jobs-then-celebrates.html.
[7] Robert Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie: Rae, Class, and Environmental Quality* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), 105.
[8] "Ownership of the Whitney," Whitney Plantation, accessed April 28, 2017, http://whitneyplantation.com/ownership-of-the-whintey.html.

America, for many people, the details are sorely lacking."[9] Cummings writes here, and has spoken elsewhere, about what he understood as a glaring omission in American understandings of enslavement and its legacies. In reading through Cummings' articles and interviews, a sense of the audience imagined for the Whitney Plantation emerges. Cummings is interested in providing education about a history he believes has not been told. Cummings' positionality in purchasing and renovating the Whitney Plantation is integral to considering the site as a museum of slavery, a memorial, and a plantation museum. While other people contributed during the reconstruction of the property, including Dr. Ibrahima Seck, a Senegalese historian who has served as the site's Director of Research since 2012, it is John Cummings' vision and financial backing that has been the main driving force behind all decisions made on the property. While it is clear that Cummings is interested in honoring those enslaved in United States, his management of the property means that there was little to no input from the public into how to tell the story of slavery, or how to best memorialize the enslaved. Many museums have numerous people represented on boards or advisory councils in order to provide various viewpoints in the construction or curation of exhibit materials. The National Museum of African American History and Culture, which opened in 2016, has 28 people on its Museum Council and includes 14 scholars as members of its Scholarly Advisory Council.[10] The NMAAHC is a federally funded museum, and thus is required to represent a range of interests on its board, while Cummings does not have the same obligations. However, the Whitney markets itself as a museum of slavery, presenting "the facts of slavery,"[11] and thus it can be compared to other sites dedicated to telling

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[9] John J. Cummings III, "The U.S. has 35,0000 museums. Why is only one about slavery?" *The Washington Post*, August 13, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2015/08/13/the-u-s-has-35000-museums-why-is-only-one-about-slavery/?utm_term=.28b0d731d014.

[10] "Leadership," National Museum of African American History and Culture, accessed April 15, 2018, https://nmaahc.si.edu/about/leadership.

[11] Cummings, "35,000 Museums."

a similar history. It is clear that the NMAAHC was interested in receiving diverse input into its museum, in the hopes of creating a space that would affect a variety of people. In contrast, the Whitney is the result of one man's vision, and thus it is important to think about his influence in the larger consideration of the site.

Whitney Plantation

In this paper, I argue that the Whitney Plantation engages in three distinct projects on its site—that of a museum of slavery, of a memorial to slavery, and as a plantation museum. While the first two projects are indeed compelling and necessary in a larger conception of public history and slavery, it is in the Whitney's role as a plantation museum focusing almost entirely on slavery that the museum is most effective, and adds a much-needed perspective to a larger industry of plantation tourism. In presenting these three unique viewpoints to its visitors, the Whitney loses some of its ability to tell its own unique story of American slavery. Chapter One will explore the Whitney as a museum of slavery, meant to teach its visitors about the entirety of American slavery through its exhibits and educational materials. In Chapter Two, I will consider the Whitney as a memorial to slavery, one of a handful of such monuments scattered across the United States. For this perspective, I will consult the numerous large-scale works on the property, as well as the other visual materials on site, meant to honor and remember those enslaved on the plantation itself and throughout the state of Louisiana. And finally, in Chapter Three, I argue that the Whitney's effectiveness as a site of slavery and public history lies in its role as a plantation museum, engaging in a very different project to other plantation sites located along the River Road. For this last perspective, I will draw upon my tour of the site, as well as tourist brochures and publicity materials from other plantation sites as well as the Whitney. In a region populated with plantation museums celebrating antebellum culture and the men and

women whose lifestyles were funded by the work of enslaved African and African descended people, the Whitney Plantation is able to reframe a plantation tour, turning the focus onto the people whose labor built the American economy. While I believe the three projects competing for focus at the Whitney serve to undermine some of its good intentions, it is in the museum's role as a unique version of a plantation museum that the Whitney finds its place as a new and vital addition to a wider American conception of public history and slavery.

Chapter 1: Museum of Slavery

Upon entering the site and parking, one first enters the Whitney's Welcome Center, checking in with the person at the front desk and receiving information about scheduled tours. It is here in the Welcome Center, adjacent to the check-in desk, that one encounters the most comprehensive information about the larger history of enslavement. There is a two-part exhibition, recently expanded, meant to introduce visitors to the Transatlantic Slave Trade and the history of enslavement in the Americas. This section includes two rooms, the first concerned with the history of the Transatlantic slave trade, the second more expansive, covering "Life on a Slave Ship," "Wealth and Capitalism," "Women," and "Free People of Color," each of these topics introduced and expanded on in panels hanging from the ceiling and attached to the walls. This area of the Whitney introduces visitors to a larger history of slavery, and corresponds to one of the Whitney's main objectives, as mentioned by owner John Cummings. While a number of museums and sites throughout the United States, and indeed throughout the world, engage with the history of enslavement of African and African-descended peoples, the Whitney Plantation's presentation of this history on a site of enslavement is relatively unique, and thus this aspect of the project is important. In this chapter, I will engage with some of John Cummings' statements about the Whitney's role as a museum of slavery, consider other sites presenting the history of slavery in the United States, and then examine the site's exhibits and educational materials provided as evidence of its position as a museum of slavery. While the site is unable to provide a comprehensive history of slavery in the United States, there are aspects that work to educate and engage its visitors with this larger history, and it is in these aspects that it is possible to see John Cummings' vision of the site as a museum of slavery realized.

What constitutes a "museum of slavery?" I argue that a museum of slavery incorporates exhibits, tours, and educational materials in order to tell a broad and well-researched history of slavery, and that an institution claiming to be a "museum of slavery" needs to incorporate artifacts, narratives, and visual materials in order to convey a large-scale, wide-reaching understanding of the history of enslavement. While this definition would apply to any museum interested in engaging with the history of slavery throughout the world, in declaring itself an American museum of slavery, a museum must provide a thorough overview of the history of slavery in the United States. It must comment especially on the evolution of the slave trade, the role of colonialism, the experiences of enslaved Africans forced to endure the Middle Passage. It should also discuss the different kinds of labor involved with different regions and landscapes, methods of both resistance and community-building, and the lived experiences of the enslaved. In David Thelen and Roy Rosenzweig's *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life,* Thelen and Rosenzweig surveyed a number of Americans who discussed their belief that history museums are their most trusted sources of historical information, in part because of the use of "authentic objects from the past."[12] In addition, a recent study conducted by the Southern Poverty Law Center found that students are not being taught the history of American slavery in schools, whether because educators do not have the resources and knowledge to teach it, or because textbooks do not adequately cover the topic.[13] If Americans believe that history museums are the most trustworthy sites to learn about history, and if American students are not being adequately taught about the history of slavery, museums of slavery occupy a particularly essential position.

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[12] Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 22.
[13] Maureen Costello, "Teaching Hard History," *Southern Poverty Law Center*, January 31, 2018, https://www.splcenter.org/20180131/teaching-hard-history.

In a 2015 article published in the *Washington Post*, John Cummings writes, "In fact, the United States did not have a single museum devoted entirely to slavery until last December, when I opened the very first one."[14] Fath Ruffin Davis has explored museums of slavery in the United States, citing 1990 as the year in which public interest in slavery prompted museums to concentrate more on exhibiting the history of slavery. Ruffin Davis cites the Old Slave Mart Museum in Charleston, South Carolina and the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, in Cincinnati, Ohio as two early museums of American slavery. She also references Douglas Wilder's never-completed "National Slavery Museum"[15] and the recently-opened National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC as emerging from the late twentieth-century interest in exhibiting slavery.[16] While the Whitney is not the first museum of slavery in the United States, it is the first museum of slavery to locate itself on the physical space of a plantation. The Whitney's location, as well as its exhibits and its educational materials, provide evidence of its role as a museum of slavery.

Exhibits

Upon walking into the Whitney's Welcome Center, one encounters two rooms with exhibition materials. The first room is small, with two walls arranged with exhibit materials rendered on glass. The wall on the left side of the room includes a timeline entitled, "International Slave Trade," with images coupled with dates and brief descriptions, beginning with "1452 Pope Nicholas V issues the bull Dum Diversas, giving a legal basis to the slave trade" accompanied by a small portrait of said Pope. Other moments highlighted by the timeline

[14] Cummings, "35,000 Museums."
[15] Douglas Wilder, the first African American governor of Virginia, announced his intentions to create the "United States National Slavery Museum" in 2001. The museum was supposed to be located in Fredericksburg, Virginia, but never began construction.
[16] Fath Davis Ruffins, "Revisiting the Old Plantation: Reparations, Reconciliation, and Museumizing American Slavery," in *Museum Frictions: Public Cultures/Global Transformations*, ed. Ivan Karp, Corinna A. Kratz, Lynn Szwaja, and Tomas Ybarra-Frausto (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2006), 394-434.

include, “1481 The Portuguese build the fortress of El Mina on the Gold Coast,” “1492 Christopher Columbus discovers the West Indies on behalf of the Spanish,” “1521 Cortés starts the conquest of Mexico.” Underneath the timeline is an image of a large white castle overlooking an ocean, entitled “El Mina Castle,” an image of a ship with a crowded deck full of black people, an image of an advertisement for the sale of a “cargo of ninety-four prime, healthy Negroes.” In addition to the key dates and images of people and objects associated with this history that line the walls, there is wall text scattered throughout the exhibit with brief summaries of major themes. One reads, “Slavery in the United States lasted for 245 years but in practice itself is much older. In ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome, slavery was a well-established institution. The word ‘slavery’ was first used during the Middle Ages. The name comes from the large number of Slavic people who were captured and sold into forced labor in the Mediterranean region.” Another such summary describes how people have historically been taken into slavery, including by debt, war, or through penal measures, while another details the history of the “Trans-Saharan slave trade.” The wall on the right side of the room focuses on Pope Nicholas V as the catalyst for the trading of African people as slaves, with a wall text that reads, “Until the 16th century, the pope was the ultimate authority in the Western World. Pope Nicholas V in 1452 issued an order granting to Portugal the exclusive right to trade with African, including the right to take slaves.” There are also panels entitled, “Slave Trade Ramps Up,” Resistance,” and a small section devoted to “Goree Island,” which includes a mention of the “so-called ‘Door of No Return.’”

Christine Mullen Kreamer has detailed her experiences of creating and mounting exhibition materials at Cape Coast Castle in Ghana, commenting especially on the difficult negotiations involved with distilling centuries of history from multiple perspectives.[17] Similar

[17] Christine Mullen Kreamer, “Shared Heritage, Contested Terrain: Cultural Negotiation and Ghana’s Cape Coast Castle Museum Exhibition ‘Crossroads of People, Crossroads of Trade,’” in *Museum Frictions: Public*

challenges are reflected in the Whitney display. The timeline represents a clear effort to cover a large period of time, focused on some of the most prominent people and moments shaping the history of slavery, while the defining of terms and inclusion of other versions of slavery anticipate questions visitors might have about the subject. In addition, the exhibit includes information on African resistance to the slave trade—one wall text details defense strategies employed by African communities to "keep the slave hunters away" while another focuses on "Queen Nzinga Mbande" who "led a resistance campaign against the Portuguese and the Atlantic slave trade for many years." This part of the exhibition is clearly meant to account for the role of African slave traders in the larger International slave trade, much as other museums of slavery have done, including the International Museum of Slavery. The International Museum of Slavery includes information on this issue on its website and in its exhibits[18], and in two museum collaborations with the Smithsonian currently being planned in Benin.[19]

Two main issues arise in the Whitney's exhibition materials as related to its role as a museum of slavery. The first is in the lack of physical objects related to slavery in the exhibitions themselves; though the buildings situated throughout the property can be considered physical objects related to slavery, the exhibits in the Welcome Center are made almost entirely of text panels and reproductions of images. This is not an issue unique to the Whitney—Fath Davis Ruffins has noted that museums had difficulty representing the Middle Passage because "virtually no real objects associated with it were known to exist"[20] before the 1990s and the

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Cultures/Global Transformations, ed. Ivan Karp, Corinna A. Kratz, Lynn Szwaja, and Tomas Ybarra-Frausto (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2006), 435-468.

[18] "The capture and sale of enslaved Africans," International Slavery Museum, accessed March 24, 2018, http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/ism/slavery/africa/capture_sale.aspx.

[19] Kevin Sieff, "An African country reckons with its history of selling slaves," *The Washington Post*, January 29, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/an-african-country-reckons-with-its-history-of-selling-slaves/2018/01/29/5234f5aa-ff9a-11e7-86b9-8908743c79dd_story.html?utm_term=.d521f12adbf4.

[20] Ruffin Davis, "Revisiting the Old Plantation," 413.

relative lack of objects has also been a criticism lodged at the National Museum of African American History and Culture.[21] However, "museum visitors, especially African American ones, wanted to see 'pieces of the true cross' displayed; that is, objects actually touched, used, and/or made by formerly free, newly enslaved people."[22] The Whitney does include some objects in its Welcome Center exhibitions, including a large metal collar with spikes pointed outward and a metal "slave handcuff" from the 19th century, and two metal "sugar cutting tools" in a display case. In addition, as the second part of this exhibition was recently opened, it seems likely that the site will continue to collect objects and expand its exhibition materials and use more physical objects to display this history. For now, however, the exhibit relies on its visitors to spend the majority of their time in this area reading instead of looking at objects.

The second issue with the Whitney's exhibition materials in this area is its scope. The National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) devotes an entire floor to this history, devoting whole rooms to aspects of the history of slavery that the Whitney includes in one sentence. The Whitney attempts to comment on numerous aspects of the history of slavery, including the International Slave Trade, resistance, and the role of African slave traders in the first room. The second room contains information about the Haitian Revolution, the farming of indigo, the labor involved with sugar cane, slave rebellions, the Middle Passage. There are also exhibit materials related to the unique experiences of enslaved black women, free people of color, and the Civil War and emancipation. It is a cursory summary of each of these themes, attempting to provide introductory information for visitors who do not have a solid foundation of knowledge in this history. While the Whitney's exhibits attempt to provide some

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[21] Philip Kennicott, "The African American Museum tells powerful stories—but not as powerfully as it could," *The Washington Post*, September 14, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/museums/the-african-american-museum-tells-powerful-stories--but-in-a-disjointed-way/2016/09/14/b7ba7e4c-7849-11e6-bd86-b7bbd53d2b5d_story.html?utm_term=.ddd876076cad.

[22] Ruffin Davis, "Revisiting the Old Plantation," 413.

information on many different aspects of the history of slavery, they are not able to comprehensively present these different themes due to a lack of space and too large a focus. Again, these are similar criticisms lodged at the NMAAHC, with one reviewer noting that "covering more than a half-millennium of history while also celebrating the rich legacy of African American cultural contributions is a lot to accomplish, even in a 400, 000-square-foot building."[23] If even a site as large as the NMAAHC is unable to comprehensively cover the entirety of this history, it seems reasonable that the Whitney's two room slavery exhibit would also be unable to accomplish this goal.

Educational Materials

In addition to the exhibits onsite, the Whitney offers education as a field trip destination and as lesson plans on its website. In a 1992 report published by the American Association of Museums entitled, "Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums," the first of the ten principles found by the report to be of utmost importance to the role of museums was "Assert that museums place education—in the broadest sense of the word at the center of their public service role. Assure that the commitment to serve the public is clearly stated in every museum's mission and central to every museum's activities."[24] This report, published by one of the largest and most prominent associations for museums and museum professionals in the world, affirms education as one of the most important functions of the museum, and thus the Whitney's emphasis on education supports its mission as a museum of slavery.

[23] Kennicott, "The African American Museum."
[24] "Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums," American Association of Museums, accessed February 3, 2018, http://ww2.aam-us.org/docs/default-source/resource-library/excellence-and-equity.pdf?sfvrsn=0.

The Whitney does not currently offer a tour separately developed for school field trips—field trips would receive a similar tour to the guided tour available for purchase, but is in the process of developing a unique school trip tour. The site has been visited by close to 15,000 students since its opening in the fall of 2015. School groups are mostly from nearby areas, including Baton Rouge, New Orleans, and Lafayette, but students also visit from Houston, the East Coast of the United States, and there are even some international school visits. In "Learning to Remember Slavery: School Field Trips and the Representation of Difficult History in English Museums," Nikki Spalding writes, "an understanding of the (re)negotiation of national memory can be gained from studying history education practice that takes place *outside* the classroom, for example at museum or heritage sites."[25] Spalding argues that the museum is a particularly effective site for the shaping of collective memory, and finds that students who visit museums to learn about slavery are able to more comprehensively understand this history. The Whitney's position as a field trip destination for local schools is important in providing a physical site in which students can learn about the history of slavery, especially given its location on an actual plantation.

The Whitney's location allows visitors a physical connection to the enslaved. Though museums around the country might have artifacts and panels and other materials arranged to tell the history of the enslaved, there is something particularly affecting about walking in the Louisiana sun, feeling the heat rise from the ground, imagining oneself forced to do backbreaking labor for hours at a time. This bodily engagement with history and memory has been explored by Derek Alderman and Rachel Campbell, who comment on the use of artifacts of slavery by Danny Drain, the curator of the Slave Relic Museum in South Carolina. They write,

[25] Nikki Spalding, "Learning to Remember Slavery: School Field Trips and the Representation of Difficult Histories in English Museums," *Journal of Educational Media, Memory & Society* 3, no. 2 (2011): 155-72. http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/stable/43049376, 156.

"By allowing visitors to hold the shackles and chains that once bound African and African-American slaves, Drain forces them to participate in a bodily performance of memory that cannot be easily forgotten or trivialized."[26] While students visiting the Whitney do not necessarily handle artifacts, they walk around the plantation and see the large sugar boiling coppers that enslaved people were once forced to stir. Students view these artifacts while listening to the tour guides detail the difficulty of this labor and touch the names of the enslaved men and women who lived at the Whitney on the "Wall of Honor." I argue that field trips to the Whitney convey similar a similar "bodily performance of memory" as holding shackles does at the Slave Relic Museum, compelling students to learn about this history in a way that combines physical, mental, and emotional engagement.

The Whitney as a physical site of slavery is also alluded to in the museum's curriculum, available on its website. The Introduction to the curriculum plan for "English/Language Arts, US History, Social Studies High School" includes a line which reads, "Using the Whitney Plantation Museum as the entry point to the discussion of this topic, students will learn about the history of those who were enslaved on plantations in the American South and whose labor helped build this country."[27] Videos filmed on site at the Whitney are arranged to connect with different modules of the curriculum plan—"Module One: Economy" features a video of a Whitney staff person standing in front of the Whitney's Big House, explaining the profitability of plantations as being dependent on enslaved labor, drawing a direct connection between the history being taught in the module and the physical space on which this history was made Among the "Outcomes" included

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[26] Derek Alderman and Rachel Campbell, "Symbolic Excavation and the Artifact Politics of Remembering Slavery in the American South: Observations from Walterboro, South Carolina," *Southeastern Geographer* 48, no. 3 (2008): 338-55, http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/stable/26225537, 340.

[27] "Curriculum Plan," Whitney Plantation, accessed March 27, 2018, http://whitneyplantation.com/assets/curriculum-plan-.pdf.

on the Whitney's "Curriculum Plan" is that "students will be able to understand the underlying economics of the plantation system in the American South, its foundational relationship with the rise of the United States, and the necessity of slavery as an institution to maintain the entire system."[28] This curriculum guide aims to teach students about the larger economic implications of the plantation system and the importance of the institution of enslavement to the founding and growth of the United States.

The curriculum guide ends with module four, entitled "Hope," which includes information on how enslaved Africans were able to preserve aspects of culture and ways that the enslaved resisted their bondage.[29] Derrick Brooms, in "Lest We Forget: Exhibiting (and Remembering) Slavery in African American Museums," writes, "Instead of trivializing, deflecting, or erasing slavery from the American story, these black-centered sites frame the institution of slavery and the experience of enslavement within the tropes of survival, resistance, and achievement."[30] This framing is clear in the Whitney's curriculum, which devotes an entire module to presenting these themes to its students, asking students to differentiate between "everyday" and "planned" resistance, to think about "ways in which African culture was preserved in the south" and even to think about which aspects of African culture surviving from slavery that they themselves might have experienced.[31] This part of the curriculum connects with Brooms' understanding of the pivotal work of African American museums, and also seeks to provide a direct connection between the students and the history about which they are being taught. The educational tools offered by the Whitney encompass one of the major goals of many

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[28] "Curriculum Plan."
[29] "Education," Whitney Plantation, accessed February 3, 2018, http://whitneyplantation.com/education.html.
[30] Derrick R. Brooms, "Lest We Forget: Exhibiting (and Remembering) Slavery in African-American Museums," *Journal of African American Studies* 15, no. 4 (2012): 508-23. http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/stable/43525466, 512.
[31] "Module Four: Hope," Whitney Plantation, accessed March 27, 2018, http://whitneyplantation.com/assets/whitney-plantation-module-four---hope.pdf.

modern history museums—to educate the public and provide tools for teachers to use in the classroom.

Conclusion

In a review posted to TripAdvisor in early March 2018, one visitor to the plantation wrote, "This should be MANDATORY EDUCATION for every single person in this country."[32] This reviewer firmly avows the Whitney Plantation Museum as an integral site of education and learning, also mentioning that her trip to the Whitney was "incredibly moving and one of the most important experiences of my life."[33] The Whitney has received many similarly enthusiastic reviews since its opening in 2015, many of which comment specifically on the site's educational value. In Ira Berlin's essay in *Slavery and Public History*, Berlin describes a reappearance of American interest in the history of slavery, commenting on the ways popular culture, art, and academia have been focusing on the history of enslavement in the last twenty years. He writes, "The last years of the twentieth century and the initial years of the twenty-first have witnessed an extraordinary engagement with slavery, sparking a rare conversation on the American past—except, of course, it is not about the past."[34] Berlin remarks on the way that the American public has begun to seriously consider connections between the history of enslavement and current issues of oppression, inequality, and violence, writing about the impact of this re-engagement as an introduction to an anthology aimed at exploring the connections between the history of slavery and museums. The Whitney Plantation, as a new and well-publicized addition to a wider museum community engaging with the history of enslavement, occupies a unique and clearly

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[32] "Whitney Plantation," TripAdvisor, accessed March 27, 2018, https://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g40128-d7276731-Reviews-Whitney_Plantation-Edgard_Louisiana.html.
[33] "Whitney Plantation."
[34] Ira Berlin, "Coming to Terms with Slavery in Twenty-First Century America," in *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory*, ed. James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 1.

engaging position. If Americans are interested and willing to engage with this history and to glimpse connections to the past, and if the Whitney represents a recognizable and emotional engaging way to access to this history, then its work as a museum of slavery remains worthy of consideration.

Chapter 2: Memorial to Enslavement

While walking around the Whitney Plantation, visitors are encouraged to ring a large iron bell in order to "honor the slaves." In a video posted by *The Atlantic* in August 2015, it is possible to see John Cummings instruct a tour guide to inform visitors about the bell's existence, and to encourage them to ring it: "When they leave, be sure that they toll that bell once for the slave, wherever there's a bell."[35]The inclusion of the bell, and the instructions to ring it to remember the enslaved, represents a concerted effort on the part of the Whitney Plantation and its owner and staff to involve the visitor in the memorialization of slavery. Throughout my tour of the site, I heard the bell tolling, and witnessed a number of visitors from my own tour group ringing it as well. The inclusion of the bell allows visitors to take a slightly more active and animated role in connecting with the enslaved, something which many visitors seemed to appreciate.

While the Whitney Plantation has been vocal about its role as a museum of slavery, the site is clearly interested in being a memorial to slavery as well as a museum. There are at least four sites on the property that can be considered memorials to the enslaved, and the Whitney's website names them as such, describing "The Wall of Honor," the "Allees Gwendolyn Midlo Hall," and "The Field of Angels" as memorials. "The Children of the Whitney" are a series of sculptures of enslaved children and are not referred to as memorials on the Whitney website. However, I consider them memorials because they are physical representations of the memories collected in the WPA narratives. The Whitney website states that the purpose of "The Children of the Whitney" is to introduce visitors to "to the lives of the enslaved workers based on the

[35] Paul Rosenfeld, "Why America Needs a Slavery Museum," *The Atlantic*, August 25, 2015, https://www.theatlantic.com/video/index/402172/the-only-american-museum-about-slavery/.

recollections of those who endured, and who shared the stories of their lives as children in slavery."[36] Kirk Savage has written about different kinds of memorials to slavery, commenting on memorials that expose the violence and degradation of slavery, those that "imagine emancipation," those that celebrate freedom, and those that encourage the memory of slavery and the enslaved.[37] "The Wall of Honor" and the "Allees Gwendolyn Midlo Hall" remember those enslaved, displaying their names so that visitors to the Whitney might think of them individually and as a collective entry into the history of slavery. "The Field of Angels" and "The Children of the Whitney" uncover this painful history and provoke emotional responses in those who witness them, recalling abolitionist rhetoric and visual representations from before emancipation. The Whitney as a memorial to slavery can be understood within a larger history of American memorials to enslavement, and online reviews about the Whitney demonstrate that visitors are reacting positively to the site as a memorial. The Whitney's admission prices and its insistence on guided tours trouble its presentation as a memorial; however, the inclusion of these sites of memorialization in the physical space in which this history occurred allows for a particularly affecting kind of memorial, one that it would seem many visitors greatly appreciate.

It is difficult to identify the exact number of memorials to slavery in the United States, given that some memorials are stand-alone, while others are attached to museums or cultural sites throughout the country. Some memorials, such as the African American Civil War Memorial in Washington, D.C. and Alison Saar's Harriet Tubman Memorial in Harlem, New York, depict African Americans fighting for their freedom. Others, like Savannah's African-American Monument, highlight a longer view of African American history as marked by the

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[36] "The Children of the Whitney," Whitney Plantation, accessed April 21, 2018, http://whitneyplantation.com/the-children-of-the-whitney.html.

[37] Kirk Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997).

history of enslavement. While there have been many controversies over Confederate memorials throughout the country, there has also been discussion about the relative lack of memorials to slavery, as well as mention of other memorials to slavery located throughout the African diaspora. In a recent article published to black website *The Root*, Kiratiana Freelon lists memorials in the Caribbean, on the continent of Africa, and in Europe, and mentions that "American cities and college campuses have removed dozens of Confederate monuments in the last two months, but more than 700 remain. Around the world, there are more than 100 monuments that highlight the resistance against slavery."[38] Freelon is interested in reframing a national conversation about Confederate memorials by highlighting monuments to slavery, but her list includes only six sites in the United States, and only two in the South—the aforementioned memorial in Savannah, Georgia, and the Whitney Plantation. Her list includes an image of one of the children of the Whitney, seated in yellowing overalls on the porch of one of the slave cabins included on the site. It is clear through Freelon's list and the lively comment section responding to the article that there is interest in memorials to enslavement, and that, amidst larger conversations about history and memory in the United States, the Whitney's inclusion of memorials is unique, and important.

There are four sites on the Whitney property that can be considered memorials to enslavement. During tours of the plantation, one early encounter is with "The Children of the Whitney," sculptures of enslaved children places throughout the property. On the Whitney website, these memorials are described: "Perhaps the most striking encounters on the plantation are the 40 statues of slave children by Ohio based African American artist Woodrow Nash. Their strikingly real appearance serves as a reminder to the visitor that it wasn't just adults that were

[38] Kiratiana Freelon, "Look at All These Monuments From Around the World That Honor Those Who Fought Against Slavery," *The Root*, August 24, 2017, https://www.theroot.com/look-at-all-these-monuments-from-around-the-world-that-1798358305.

effected by slavery."[39] The Children of the Whitney are based on the Works Progress Administration's Federal Writers' Project Slave Narratives. The statues are of the individuals interviewed during the project who were from Louisiana, but they are meant to represent the interviewees as they were when they experienced enslavement, as children. The use of the word "striking" twice in the description shows the intention of these pieces—to arrest the visitor, emotionally connect with the visitor, and to locate the bodily experience of enslavement on the site where the history took place. The bodily experience of slavery has been explored by Lisa Woolfork who writes of the National Great Blacks in Wax Museum, "The museum attempts to transmit traumatic knowledge in its wax figures, and its three-dimensional approach is intended to promote a visceral, empathetic connection to the slave past."[40] Though the Children of the Whitney are made of clay instead of wax, their three-dimensionality is meant to evoke empathy and to bring the physical presence of the enslaved into the museum, and the fact that they are children is meant to evoke even more of an emotional response. They are lifelike and life-size, and there are many of them—most are located in the Antioch Baptist Church, but there are a few near the slave cabins and some even in the Big House, which I will discuss in the next chapter. Their physical presence brings the past into the present, and their childlike features provoke feelings of protectiveness and deep sadness. Each sculpture is unique, and each child wears clothing meant to invoke poverty and decay—red-brown overalls and faded yellow dresses, worn-out looking hats and stretched-out t-shirts. All of the children are barefoot, and their bodies convey exhaustion and terror, their shoulders slope and their eyes are cast downward, their heads sinking under the weight of hundreds of years of pain and hard labor. Their clothes recall the

[39] "On the Property," Whitney Plantation, accessed February 24, 2018, http://whitneyplantation.com/on-the-property.html.
[40] Lisa Woolfork, *Embodying American Slavery in Contemporary Culture*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 108.

ragged attire of "pickaninnies,"[41] who as defined by Robin Bernstein, were denied humanity because of their inability to feel pain. However, the facial expressions and body language relate more abolitionist use of images of black children. Bernstein writes, "To combat the libel of black insensateness, abolitionists showcased the physical, emotional, and spiritual suffering of enslaved people. When abolitionists dramatized slaves' pain…they based an argument for human rights on the ability to suffer."[42] The "Children of the Whitney" emphasize the pain and suffering enacted by enslavement, and the choice of children to depict this pain is meant to cause maximum emotional appeal. When visitors check in at the Welcome Center, they are given lanyards with images of a child and their name on the front, and quotes from the Federal Writers' Project on the back. Visitors are told to wear the lanyards around their necks to show that they have paid, but also to identify with the child whose image is on the badge and are encouraged to find the corresponding statue throughout the tour. It is an uncomfortable feeling, to wear an image of a slave child around one's neck, but it provokes an identification, an intense connection. Visitors are encouraged to take these badges home, to keep the memory of their experience at the Whitney present upon their return to their regular lives.

The second memorial one encounters at the Whitney is the "Wall of Honor": "This memorial is dedicated [to] all the people who were enslaved on Whitney Plantation. The names and the information related to them (origins, age, skills) were retrieved from original archives and engraved on granite slabs."[43] The memorial is one of the few places at the Whitney that directly addresses those who were enslaved on the property—other memorial sites invoke the spirit of those enslaved in Louisiana, across the United States, or St. John the Baptist Parish, in

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[41] Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (New York: NYU Press, 2011).
[42] Bernstein, *Racial Innocence*, 51.
[43] "Home."

which the Whitney is located. The names included on the Wall of Honor were taken from numerous sources—the plantation records, the civil records of the area, and the records of the Archdiocese of New Orleans. While the Wall of Honor is less visually affecting than the Children of the Whitney, it works to personalize the experience of those enslaved on the actual site in a way that the Children of the Whitney cannot, as the men and women upon whom the Children of the Whitney were based were not actually enslaved on the site. In the previous chapter, I mentioned that one critique of the Whitney as a museum of slavery is that its scope is too large, that it tries to tell the entire history of slavery when it might be better served by focusing on its local history. The Wall of Honor is the best example of that work—it gives those enslaved on the site a visibility that is not usually available when discussing the history of the enslaved. Each person's individual history is carved into granite—where before their individual stories might have been lost, they now occupy a space of implied permanence.

In his 2004 article in *The Journal of American History*, Ira Berlin writes about the difference in American understandings of the history and the memory of enslavement, and about the continued work to be done in reckoning with the implications of slavery on the American present. He writes, "The memory of slavery in the United States is constructed on different ground from its history. Rather than global, it is local. Memories generally derive from the particular rather than from a consideration of the larger context."[44] Berlin argues that memory is based on the local and the personal, and these two are clearly evident in this particular memorial—the Wall of Honor preserves and displays the names of the men and women enslaved on the site, and invokes the entire history of enslavement through the 350 lives lived on the ground on which the memorial stands. Ibrahima Seck, the chief historian of the Whitney

[44] Ira Berlin, "American Slavery in History and Memory and the Search for Social Justice," *The Journal of American History* 90, no. 4 (2004): 1251-268. doi:10.2307/3660347.

Plantation, in a 2015 interview, said, "Everything we provide here is based on real people and very specific things. You find the real people, where they came from, what were their skills, their diseases. You can find them also being taken to court because they run away. You see them being punished. You see some of them in revolts. There is no fiction here. There is nothing you can deny here."[45] Seck's discussion connects to Berlin's understanding of memory and locality, as Seck's assertion that the Whitney provides "real people and very specific things" allows its visitors to learn about and honor local history. This local history thus allows Whitney visitors access to the history and memory of enslavement through the local and specific, allowing them the ability to derive memory from the particular.

Seck is also interested here in the veracity of the history being told on the plantation, which references a question included in the introduction to Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America*. Hartman asks, "Are we witnesses who confirm the truth of what happened in the face of the world-destroying capacities of pain, the distortions of torture, the sheer unrepresentability of terror, and the repression of the dominant accounts? Or are we voyeurs fascinated with and repelled by exhibitions of terror and sufferance?"[46] This question also surfaces in the course of tours at the Whitney. There is a real emphasis on the violence and pain suffered by the enslaved, with tour guides continually reiterating the "scenes of subjection" invoked by Hartman in the title of her book. These stories and moments, in which whippings and rape and death are mentioned over and over, are meant to provoke empathetic response in visitors, many of whom might not have been otherwise exposed to this history. However, the constant refrain can edge toward

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[45] Michael Patrick Welch, "America's First Slavery Museum Shifts the Focus from Masters to Slaves," *VICE*, November 16, 2015, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/avy8yj/americas-first-slavery-museum-shifts-the-focus-from-masters-to-slaves-511.

[46] Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 3.

voyeurism. Tour guides emphasize the "breeding process" of enslaved people, even speaking of "slave farms," described as breeding grounds to ensure the conception of the lighter-skin offspring of black women and European men. The discussion of "slave farms" on my tour felt voyeuristic—feeling compelled to imagine large scale operations meant to encourage the rape of black women edged past wanting to learn and remember into something darker and more disturbing. Hartman asks us to "consider the precariousness of empathy and the thin line between witness and spectator,"[47] and it is this thin line that the Whitney's emphasis on the rape of black women seems to trouble, asking its visitors to cross from witness to spectator and back again.

The next memorial at the Whitney Plantation is the "Allées Gwendolyn Midlo Hall," which is described on the Whitney website as "the slave memorial dedicated to 107,000 people enslaved in Louisiana and documented in the 'Louisiana Slave Database' built by Gwendolyn Midlo Hall."[48] Inspired by Maya Lin's Vietnam Veteran's Memorial in Washington, DC, the Allées Gwendolyn Midlo Hall represents a concerted effort by the Whitney to locate slavery within a larger culture of American memorialization. The 107,000 names are engraved on granite slabs, much as the Wall of Honor, but the sheer number of names included means that the Allées Gwendolyn Midlo Hall is overwhelming in the amount of names and number of slabs. In selecting Maya Lin's design for the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial, jurors wrote, "This memorial with its wall of names becomes a place of quiet and reflection, and a tribute to those who served their nation in difficult times. All who come here can find it a place of healing."[49] These intensions are clear when one visits the Allées Gwendolyn Midlo Hall memorial—the Whitney memorial also includes walls of names and the symmetry of the 18 walls covered in names and

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[47] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 19.
[48] "The Wall of Honor," Whitney Plantation, accessed February 24, 2018, http://whitneyplantation.com/the-wall-of-honor.html.
[49] Erika Doss, *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 130.

images invites introspection and quiet contemplation. Also like Maya Lin's design, the Allées Gwendolyn Midlo Hall's names are carved into reflective dark granite, which means that visitors can glimpse themselves within the names of the enslaved, and can understand themselves as a part of this history.

In her 2010 book entitled, *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America*, Erika Doss describes the participatory nature of the Vietnam Memorial: "Visiting the Wall is akin to descending into a dark void and then walking out 'into the light;' other experiential aspects include reading and touching the names of the 58,253 dead inscribed on its symmetrical slates, seeing one's own body reflected on its mirror-like surfaces, and leaving 'tokens of remembrance,' such as flowers, poems, photographs, and medals."[50] While the Whitney memorial does not entail "descending into a dark void," visitors may touch the names engraved on the slabs, and see themselves reflected in the memorial. In addition, the sheer number of names is overwhelming—if visitors to the Vietnam Memorial are overwhelmed by the impact of 58,253 names, being surrounded by the 107,000 names included in the Louisiana Slave Database can be totally debilitating. I would argue that including two such similar memorials so close together—the Wall of Honor and the Allées Gwendolyn Midlo Hall—slightly lessens the impact of the memorials, as seeing thousands of names carved onto granite slabs without being able to linger and contemplate is difficult and makes it hard to sustain such deep emotional engagement. While visitors are allowed to return to the memorials after the guided visit concludes, they are only given a few minutes at each memorial in the course of the tour and are not allowed to visit the site alone without having just been on a guided visit. However, it is clear that the intention of the Whitney is to allow visitors to engage with these memorials and with these names in their

[50] Doss, *Memorial Mania*, 128.

own way, whether that means touching the names and feeling the impact of thousands of lives lived in bondage, or taking photos of one's reflection within the names in order to consider one's own place within this history, or to leave a post-it alongside those of the hundreds of others that have been impacted by their visit. The Allées Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, along with the other memorials at the Whitney, provides an opportunity to engage in memory work on the site, alongside other likeminded visitors, and its impact for visitors cannot be denied.

The final memorial located on the Whitney Plantation is "The Field of Angels," "a section of the slave memorial dedicated to 2,200 Louisiana slave children who died in St. John the Baptist Parish. These names are documented in the Sacramental Records of the Archdiocese of New Orleans."[51] The memorial consists of a large bronze sculpture of a black woman angel kneeling and holding a small child, her wings spread as if she will soon spring into the air to take the child into the heavens, surrounded by names and quotes engraved on granite slabs. The artist is Rod Moorhead, an African American sculptor from Mississippi, whose work also includes public art installations at the University of Mississippi and in downtown Jackson, Mississippi. In an interview with John Cummings in the *New York Times Magazine,* David Amsden remarks on the process of constructing the "Field of Angels," mentioning, "At traditional museums, such memorials come to fruition only after a lengthy process—proposals by artists, debates among the board members, the securing of funds. This statue, though, like everything on the property, began as a vision in Cummings's mind and became a reality shortly after he pulled out his checkbook."[52] By comparing the creation of memorials at the Whitney to other museums, Amsden brings up an important point both about the nature of the Whitney and about its role as a memorial to slavery. While it is clear that the statues and sculptures on site are the result of

[51] "On the Property," Whitney Plantation, accessed February 25, 2018, http://whitneyplantation.com/on-the-property.html.
[52] Amsden, "Building the First Slavery Museum in America."

careful and considered work by black artists, they are also the direct reflection of John Cummings's vision, and thus represent a memory of slavery that might not reflect a larger public understanding. In that same article, Amsden quotes Ibrahima Seck in considering Cummings's influence: "If John feels something, he just goes ahead and does it. His stubbornness can be frustrating, but who in the world is willing to put so many millions of dollars into a project like this? If you find one, you have to support it."[53] Seck echoes Amsden's earlier comment about the pervasiveness of Cummings's vision, and points to one large critique of the Whitney as a memorial to slavery—its memorials are largely the result of one man's understanding of slavery, and there is little to no input from the public about what is included on site.

While the public had little role in what is included at the Whitney, there is a participatory element available on site. Visitors are invited to leave tokens of remembrance back in the Visitor Center, where there are hundreds of post-it notes attesting to the power of memory invoked by the Whitney's memorials. James Edward Young has written about the practice of such participatory memorials, especially in relation to Holocaust memorials. He writes, "all such sites depend for their memory on the passersby who initiate it," and that "the site alone cannot remember, that it is the projection of memory by visitors into a space that makes it a memorial."[54] The Whitney memorials are evidence of the power of participation in memorialization. The post-it notes encourage visitors to communicate with one another by articulating the aspects of the Whitney they deem most important. In addition, the wall of post-its functions as a kind of memorial itself, where people can write down their memories of the site and where these memories can be layered over one another and joined together, a physical projection of the memory work on the site of the Whitney and by the people who have visited.

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[53] Amsden, "Building the First Slavery Museum in America."
[54] James Edward Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1993), 41.

It is clear that visitors to the site are profoundly moved by its memorialization. On TripAdvisor, 196 of 886 reviews mention the memorials as a particularly important part of the site, while 37 of 132 reviews on Yelp explicitly mention the memorials. One TripAdvisor reviewer, who visited the plantation in December 2017, wrote, "It was an incredibly moving experience to read the testimonials collected from former slaves that are featured on the memorials. There are various bells scattered around the site that you could ring to pay respects to the enslaved workers who were held on the plantation and that was special to be able to do."[55] This reviewer focuses heavily on the emotional connection invoked by the memorials and the bells, and cites these aspects of the tour as her reasoning for visiting the Whitney, "due to its focus on the realities of slavery."[56] Another reviewer, this one visiting from the United Kingdom, also raved about the memorials: "The memorials with thousands of names of slaves, the account of the monetary value of slaves working at the Whitney and the testimonies on the memorials really hit you…The statues of slave children by Woodrow Nash that are dotted about the church and slave quarters are arresting."[57] This reviewer specifically mentions the names on the memorials, and also points to the "Children of the Whitney" as emotionally engaging.

The Whitney memorials are part of a larger national project of engagement with slavery, history, and memory, of which the newly opened National Museum of African American History and Culture is one of the latest examples, but the contemplative and emotional nature of the memorial has unique relevance. The Bench by the Road Project, launched in 2006, is an early example of this work: inspired by a 1989 interview with Toni Morrison in which the author laments the absence of contemplative spaces to consider slavery, the Bench by the Road Project has installed 20 benches as sites throughout the world where people can meditate on the history

[55] TripAdvisor, "Whitney Plantation."
[56] TripAdvisor, "Whitney Plantation."
[57] TripAdvisor, "Whitney Plantation."

and memory of slavery.[58] Morrison said at the time, "There is no place you or I can go, to think about or not think about, to summon the presences of, or recollect the absences of slaves . . . There is no suitable memorial, or plaque, or wreath, or wall, or park, or skyscraper lobby. There's no 300-foot tower, there's no small bench by the road."[59] The Whitney Plantation offers memorials to the enslaved, those enslaved on the site itself, in the state of Louisiana, and those taken too soon by the violence inherent in bondage. Visitors to the site are visibly affected by these memorials, and there is real meaning in the fact that the memorials are situated on a plantation, allowing for the consideration of these memories on the ground on which they occurred. However, one is not allowed extended contemplation—unlike the Bench on the Road project, or the memorial mentioned in Savannah, Georgia, visitors must pay to get into the Whitney, and they are not permitted to wander the site at their leisure.

In addition to the overwhelming influence of John Cummings, the cost of admission is the most compelling critique of the Whitney as memorial to slavery. Admission to the Whitney is steep—general admission is $22.00, children 6-12 are $10.00, and discount admission (for students, seniors, and members of the military) is $17.00.[60] While these prices are in keeping with other plantations in the area—nearby Oak Alley costs $25 for adults and $10 for kids—these admission prices are inaccessible to many. Other memorials are readily accessible to the public including the African-American Family Monument in Savannah, Georgia, which is available as part of the River Street Memorials[61], and the African Burial Ground National

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[58] "Bench by the Road Project," Toni Morrison Society, accessed February 25, 2018, http://www.tonimorrisonsociety.org/bench.html.
[59] "Bench by the Road Project."
[60] "Visit," Whitney Plantation, accessed February 25, 2018, http://whitneyplantation.com/visit.html.
[61] "River Street Memorials," Visit Historic Savannah, accessed February 25, 2018, http://www.visit-historic-savannah.com/river-street-memorials.html.

Monument in New York, which is part of the National Parks Service and has free admission[62]. To those interested in a space to sit and consider the history of enslavement, $22 might be cost-prohibitive. A guided tour is included with the cost of admission and is required to access the site. Tours usually only last for 1.5-2 hours, meaning that visitors are always accompanied by a tour guide and that there is little opportunity to spend extended periods of time considering the memorials, though visitors are allowed to go back to the memorials at the end of the tour. There is no information on the Whitney's website about why visitors must book guided tours to access the property, but it might be because many of the buildings have not yet been restored, so it would be dangerous for visitors to roam unattended. This might be why visitors are allowed to go back to the memorials at the end of the tour—the area around the memorials has been the most recently reconstructed—but it does not explain why people are not allowed to visit the site only to experience the memorials. While neither of these issues detract from the mission of the Whitney to memorialize enslavement, they both raise questions about the accessibility of the Whitney to the general public and about the efficacy of the memorials. Morrison mentioned summoning the recollections of the enslaved as something sorely needed in the late 1980s, but the Whitney might not be best situated for this summoning either.

In considering the Whitney as a memorial to slavery, it is clear that the site itself and its founder are particularly interested in engaging in the memorialization of slavery. Each of the memorials on site has been carefully considered and provokes emotional engagement, as is clear from the reviews of the site and from the extensive news coverage before the site's opening. The use of granite and the engraving of names calls to mind other memorial sites, and firmly situates the history of slavery alongside other American memorials. It is also important that the memory

[62] "African Burial Ground," National Parks Service, accessed February 25, 2018, https://www.nps.gov/afbg/planyourvisit/basicinfo.htm.

of those enslaved on the site is evoked through the Wall of Honor, and that the formerly enslaved are allowed to speak for themselves through the Works Progress Administration Slave Narrative quotes that are scattered around the property. While I would argue that the admission price and inability to visit the site without being on a guided tour diminish the site's ability to serve as a memorial, visitor reviews prove that people are moved by its efforts to remember the enslaved. While I believe the Whitney's memorials are arresting and emotionally engaging, I think the Whitney's most important project is in its role as a plantation museum, which I will discuss in the next chapter.

Chapter 3: Plantation Museum

During my recent tour of the Whitney Plantation, after we'd spent time at the memorials and walked through the slave cabins, we prepared to enter the Big House from the back of the house. Our tour guide stopped us, and spoke to us of the perspective she wanted us to keep in mind as we toured the house: "Now I want you guys to know, the Big House is not the main focus of our tour. Not the lives of the enslaver, the lives of the enslaved. So the Big House is seen through the eyes of the enslaved teenagers who worked in that house…So the house would not have been beautiful in their eyes. It was just work." Throughout our tour of the Big House, the tour guide described each room from the perspective of the enslaved, commenting especially on how much work would have been involved with preparing food, cleaning, and taking care of the men and women who owned the house. This focus, on how the house would have appeared to the enslaved people who worked there, rather than on its architectural beauty or on the period furniture, is markedly different than other plantation tours along Louisiana's River Road, many of which frame the Big House as the highlight of the tour, even if they do also comment on the lives of the enslaved at points throughout the tour. This shift in perspective in terms of the Big House represents the most effective project of the Whitney Plantation, focusing on the experience of the enslaved rather than the experience of the enslavers. The Whitney as reformation of the plantation museum is evident in the site's marketing and tours, especially in juxtaposition to other plantations in the area, including Oak Alley Plantation and the Laura Plantation. The Whitney is the first plantation museum in this area to focus wholly on the lives of the enslaved, and thus I argue that its greatest strength is in this focus. While the Whitney frames itself as a museum of slavery and a memorial to slavery, I believe it is most effective in its focus

on slavery as a plantation museum, and the Whitney should consider expanding on this focus as it continues to grow.

Marketing

In tourism kiosks throughout Louisiana, there are a number of brochures dedicated to "New Orleans Plantation Country" as the River Parish region, located in between Baton Rouge and New Orleans, markets itself.[63] The Whitney's focus is clearly displayed on its brochure, especially when glimpsed next to the brochures of other sites. The Whitney's brochure features an image of one of the "Children of the Whitney" sculptures, a young enslaved girl dressed in a faded blue dress, appearing to squint at the viewer with fatigue and resignation. Other sculptures can be glimpsed surrounding her, and the only text on the cover reads, "The Story of Slavery: Whitney Plantation." Other plantation museum brochures feature live oak trees and Big Houses, the juxtaposition of oaks and mansion invoking imagery of planters and their luxurious lives. Still others feature images of planters themselves, their wealth signaled by their opulent clothing and lavish surroundings.

These brochures provide an early glimpse into the way different plantations market themselves, and the linkages between them. The covers of the different brochures introduce possible tourists to each site's main focus. The image on the cover of the Whitney brochure declares to viewers that the site is focused on the tragic history of plantation slavery, while the inside furthers this intention. Upon opening the brochure, a large image of two slave cabins stretches across the two folds, while smaller images of sites featured on the plantation occupy small boxes across the top. The images are carefully arranged to juxtapose the lives of the enslaved against those of their enslavers: a glimpse of a sparsely furnished room in a slave cabin

[63] "About Us," New Orleans Plantation Country, accessed March 17, 2018, http://neworleansplantationcountry.com/about.

sits next to an image of the decorated parlor from the Big House, while another image of a wooden slave cabin is positioned next to an image of the plantation's Big House. The intent is clearly to show the emphasis on the lives of the enslaved, and to call tourists interested in this perspective to visit the site. The back of the brochure furthers this message. Above and below more images of the "Children of the Whitney" is text that reads "About: Whitney Plantation is the only plantation museum in Louisiana with an exclusive focus on the lives of enslaved people." This brochure is evidence of the Whitney as plantation museum, and its imagery and text provide a clear contrast to the focus of the other plantations previously mentioned.

Oak Alley's brochure is a marked contrast to the Whitney's, as the front page features a large image of the Big House surrounding by ancient live oaks, and the inside panels emphasize the commercial aspects of the site. The emphasis on the Big House and the complete absence of enslaved laborers references John Michael Vlach's discussion of plantation imagery in *Landscape of Slavery: The Plantation in American Art*. Vlach's focus is on the plantation in landscape paintings, but he writes, "Created as emblems of wealth, these paintings often include only such features of scenery as expanses of lawn and a few ornamental trees standing near the mansion. The close focus on the planter's house confirmed his importance and pushed any indications of the slave labor on which his fortune depended […] well beyond the margins of the canvas."[64] This description, of plantation paintings focused on the life and wealth of enslavers, utilizing natural beauty of the plantation itself to minimize the work of the enslaved, also perfectly describes the image of Oak Alley on the front of its brochure, while the back features a collage of images expressly invoking the tourist nature of the site. Images of the period furniture decorating each room, along with another image of the Big House surrounded by nature and the

[64] John Michael Vlach, "Perpetuating the Past: Plantation Landscape Paintings Then and Now," in *Landscape of Slavery: The Plantation in American Art*, ed. Angela D. Mack and Stephen G. Hoffius (Columbia, South Carolina: The University of South Carolina Press, 2008), 17.

entertainment provided on site, including dining, shopping, and special events position Oak Alley as a plantation theme park, where one might participate in the beauty of the architecture and carefully cultivated landscaping while also enjoying Cajun cuisine, a gift shop, and an ice cream parlor.

Brochures represent the first contact some tourist might have with these museums.[65] The Whitney's brochure heavily features images representative of slavery, emphasizing the connection between plantations and slavery. David Butler examined tourist brochures from 100 plantation museums in 2001, finding that the majority of these brochures mentioned owners, landscapes, and furnishings more often than slavery, slave cabins, or the enslaved.[66] While Butler's study was from 2001, encounters with numerous tourist kiosks in New Orleans and Baton Rouge showed me that the vast majority of plantation museums in this area continue to feature images of Big Houses, trees, and slaveowners, and that the Whitney remains the only plantation museum which features images of the enslaved on its cover. Butler writes, "for the most part, tourists visit plantations in order to see the items most often mentioned in the brochures: architecture, heritage, gardens, furniture and the like. They are not there to have the seedy side of plantations-slavery-shown to them."[67] The tourists mentioned in Butler's study are attracted to these plantations because they want to experience opulence and romanticism, and thus most plantations promise them these experiences through their brochures. The Whitney's brochure provides a stark contrast to the other brochures in these kiosks, refusing to allow tourists to imagine plantations without also remembering whose labor made this opulence

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[65] David L. Butler, Perry L. Carter, and Owen J. Dwyer, "Imagining Plantations: Slavery, Dominant Narratives, and the Foreign Born," *Southeastern Geographer* 48, no. 3 (2008): 288-302. http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/stable/26225534.

[66] David Butler, "Whitewashing Plantations: The Commodification of a Slave-Free Antebellum South," International Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Administration, Volume 2, 2001 Issue 3-4.

[67] Butler, "Whitewashing Plantations," 171.

possible. The Whitney as a plantation museum makes slavery visible, not only on the property itself but also in juxtaposition to the other tourist sites in the area.

Tours

While the Whitney's tour bears some resemblance to other plantation tours in the area, there are some noticeable differences, especially in terms of perspective. Admission fees are similar for plantation tours throughout the region. Most sites have museum shops and feature guided tours, though guided tours are required for the entirety of some properties, like the Whitney, while visitors are only required to participate in guided tours of certain portions of other sites. The real difference between the sites is apparent in the Whitney's focus on the lives of the enslaved, which is clear from the moment one checks in at the visitor center. As mentioned earlier, each visitor is given a lanyard with an image of one of the "Children of the Whitney" and information about the corresponding child to wear around their neck, signaling that the visitor is adopting the perspective of the enslaved while touring the site. This is contrasted with first impressions on other plantation tours, especially Oak Alley, where visitors encounter an ice cream shop and mint julep bar upon entering the site.

At the Whitney Plantation, the first stop is the Antioch Baptist Church, where one hears a little bit about the families who owned the plantation as well as the community of freedmen who started the church in 1870. From there, tours encounter the various memorials to the Whitney, before being introduced and allowed to enter into the slave quarters. The slave quarters, like the Antioch Baptist Church and the memorials, are not original to the site. According to the Whitney website, there were originally 22 slave cabins on site, but they were destroyed in the 1970s. The slave cabins that are now on site, of which only one has been renovated and is safe for visitation,

were "acquired" from nearby plantations.[68] After the visit to the slave quarters, tour guides discuss the labor involved with processing sugar cane, before leading visitors by various outbuildings original to the property, including a blacksmith shop, mule barn, overseer's cottage, and a French Creole barn, none of which are currently available for visitation. Right before entering the Big House, guests are invited to enter the original kitchen, "believed to be the oldest detached kitchen in Louisiana,"[69] which has been restored.

The last stop on the tour is the Big House. In the dining room on the ground floor, tour guides note which enslaved laborers would have been required to serve guests, and what that work would have entailed, while in the Master Bedroom the tour guide notes that enslaved wet nurses would have had to nurse the children of the plantation owners, unable to provide milk for her own children. In the other bedroom, that belonging to Marie Azélie Haydel, a lone "Children of the Whitney" sculpture has been placed next to the bed. The tour guide explains that this is an image of "Hannah Kelly, a companion slave who once slept right here in this room on a pallet on the floor at the foot of the bed." It is here in this room, while encountering a life size sculpture of an enslaved child, that the Whitney's reorientation of the plantation museum tour is most effective. Instead of framing the owners of the plantation as romantic and aspirational, tours of the Whitney's Big House constantly reposition the narrative of the plantation from the point of view of the enslaved, refusing to allow visitors to participate in the romanticization of the Old South. This constant repositioning is a contrast to what Modlin Jr, Alderman, and Gentry found in their article exploring what they have termed "affective inequality" at plantation museums. They write, "At some sites, docents might ask tourists to imagine briefly some aspect of slavery,

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[68] "The Slave Quarters," Whitney Plantation, accessed March 17, 2018, http://whitneyplantation.com/the-slave-quarters.html.
[69] "The Big House and Outbuildings," Whitney Plantation, accessed March 17, 2018, http://whitneyplantation.com/the-big-house-and-outbuildings.html.

but such emotive adventures are often little more than short detours from what remains a 'white-centric' representation of the plantation."[70] "Affective inequality" is the way docents encourage visitors to identify with slave owners rather than the enslaved, which is common at other plantations along the Louisiana River Road. This is very different than the experience at the Whitney, where tour guides insist that visitors identify with the enslaved, framing the entire tour from their perspective. This is one of the Whitney's strengths, that it allows no opportunity for visitors to picture themselves as slaveowners and thus approach the tour as aspirational.

This repositioning is also clear in the images available on the site, which is very different than other sites in the area. The Whitney does not display a single image of the slaveowning families who lived at the plantation, while Oak Alley and Laura plantations display portraits of family members in every room. The Laura plantation displays reconstructed cardboard figures of some of the early residents of the plantation, and both sites include photographs of more recent members of the families. Though both sites also discuss the lives of enslaved people, the abundance of pictures showing the faces of the planter family at the Laura and Oak Alley allow the white slaveowners familiarity and humanity—visitors can literally put a face to the name of the white people discussed on site. The total opposite happens at the Whitney. The only images available on site are those included in the various memorials, especially the "Children of the Whitney," one of whom is stationed inside the Big House, while another gazes at the entrance to the house from the far end of the path. In addition to images, the Whitney rarely references the owners of the plantation by name, instead focusing on the "Wall of Honor," which lists the names of all of the enslaved people who lived on the plantation. The Whitney's use of images

[70] E. Arnold Modlin Jr, Derek H. Alderman, and Glenn W. Gentry, "Tour Guides as Creators of Empathy: The Role of Affective Inequality in Marginalizing the Enslaved at Plantation House Museums," *Tourist Studies*, Volume 11 issue 1, pages 3-19, published April 1, 2011.

and names has the effect of disallowing any identification with the slaveowners, and creating a total focus on the enslaved.

Another way the Whitney reframes the plantation tour is by refusing to engage in the "good slaveowner" narrative. Jennifer Eichstedt and Stephen Small, in their 2002 survey of plantations in Virginia, Georgia, and Louisiana, found that "thirty-five percent of all sites, including those categorized as segregated, in-between, or engaged in relative incorporation, dealt with the moral dilemma created by the institution of slavery by presenting the master-enslavers whose lives they interpret as good owners."[71] The Laura Plantation presents an interesting example of this narrative. The tour guide I encountered on a visit to the site in 2018 emphasized a distinction between some members of the family who owned the plantation who were known for their cruelty to the enslaved, and others who were more "sensitive." The tour, which is framed from the point of view of Laura, after whom the plantation was named, who sold the plantation in 1892. Laura and her father are framed as kinder to the enslaved people who lived on the plantation, though neither made moves to free the enslaved laborers on their part of the plantation before the Civil War, and both participated in the sharecropping system that continued on the plantation after emancipation. Eichstedt and Small theorize that sites participate in this narrative because it "softens the blow of slavery."[72] The Laura could be using this narrative for this reason, but I also think the site is interested in having visitors identify with Laura, given that it is her perspective that frames the tour. It would be more difficult to justify the constant references to Laura and her diary if tour guides acknowledged her complicity in the same system to the same extent as the less kind members of her family. The Whitney, on the other hand, does

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[71] Jennifer L. Eichstedt and Stephen Small, *Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002), 161.
[72] Eichstedt and Small, *Representations of* Slavery, 164.

not participate in this narrative in any way. There is little reference to any of the family members who owned the plantation, and when there is, they are framed as all equally complicit in the institution of slavery.

There is one way in which the Whitney's presentation of slavery is not as strong as that of other sites located in the same area. The Laura provides the most information about the connection between enslavement and emancipation, commenting especially on sharecropping at the Laura. This connection is driven home by an anecdote that provokes gasps from the crowd—descendants of those enslaved at the Laura lived, until 1977, in the same cabins in which their enslaved ancestors lived. In 1977 the owners of the property told them to leave. This anecdote is supported by faded pink paint on the walls of the slave cabins visitors walk through; the paint was applied by one of the later residents of this cabin. Eichstedt and Small also noticed this emphasis at the Laura, mentioning that it "was the only site that we toured that suggested that the type of sharecropping system put into place after the Civil War amounted to another kind of enslavement and exploitation."[73] The Whitney also engages with this history, mentioning at various moments of the tour that the descendants of those enslaved at the Whitney continue to live in the surrounding area and that circumstances were similar after emancipation as during slavery.

The Whitney also includes the Antioch Baptist church on site, which was built after the Civil War. According to the Whitney Plantation website, the church was the "only Black church for miles on the east bank of the Mississippi River,"[74] and was attended mostly by formerly enslaved people. When its congregation built a new structure in 1999, the old building was donated to the Whitney. In the course of the tour, as well as on the Whitney's website, the

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[73] Small and Eichstedt, *Representations of* Slavery, 229.
[74] "The Antioch Baptist Church," Whitney Plantation, accessed April 30, 2017, http://whitneyplantation.com/antich-baptist-church.html.

church's specific history is invoked, with the church's original name and function as a mutual aid society featured heavily: "The society was an organization that operated similarly to our present day burial insurances. Members paid nickels and dimes in membership dues and the society was responsible for their funeral expenses. The name Anti-Yoke was chosen for this society. This name spoke freedom - not tied or bound to anyone."[75]

Paul Lawrence Dunbar, in his 2011 article entitled, "Hidden in Plain Sight: African American Secret Societies and Black Freemasonry," writes, "Rather than the black church and African American secret, mutual aid, and fraternal organizations embodying separate and distinct means of social protest; these organizations complemented each other and have played interrelated roles in the way the black community addressed social, political, and economic problems."[76] The inclusion of the Antioch Baptist Church provides a glimpse into an integral space for community and economic support for newly freed African Americans In addition, it draws a direct link between slavery and emancipation—as black people were forced to provide free labor and unable to build wealth individually or as a community during enslavement, then-recently freed people had little access to personal wealth, making mutual aid societies (in which larger numbers of people pooled resources in order to provide access to medical support, funeral expenses, and similar needs) incredibly important. Also mentioned during the tour is the fact that the church retains an active community and is now located on a larger plot of land in Lutcher, Louisiana. A church built by recently freed people remains in operation today, in the same communities where freedpeople first settled after emancipation. This fact adds another dimension to the connection between enslaved people and African Americans today, and though this link is not explicitly mentioned in the course of tours of the Whitney, I believe the inclusion

[75] "The Antioch Baptist Church."
[76] Paul Lawrence Dunbar, "Hidden in Plain Sight: African American Secret Societies and Black Freemasonry," Journal of African American Studies 16, no. 4 (2012;2011;): 622-637.

of the Antioch Baptist Church is meant to help visitors think about these connections. However, while the inclusion of the Antioch Baptist Church signals this connection, it is not as explicit as the Laura's mention that black people continued to live in slave cabins until the 1970s. Visitors gasp at this anecdote when it is announced at the Laura, because it seems so recent and because it provides a direct link between slavery and generational poverty for African Americans. The Antioch Baptist Church does not evoke the same link—it implies the link between slavery and the black present, but it also inspires hope. The church was used to establish a community of black people after freedom, and it does the same work today, but it signals progress and autonomy. The slave cabins at the Laura signal desperation and subjection. In considering the Whitney as a plantation museum interested in changing the perspective of plantation tours, the site might consider adding more overt mention of the connection between slavery and the later history of African Americans in the region.

Right after leaving the Big House, while wrapping up the tour, the tour guide says, "So when you guys leave here today, if you remember nothing else from this tour, we ask that you remember that the wealth and luxury of America is in part due to the free labor of African slaves and their descendants." The parting thought, then, is to the connection between luxury and wealth and the labor of enslaved people, inextricably linking the two and doing so on the physical space of the plantation itself. The Whitney's strength lies in its total dedication to the history of slavery, from the moment visitors walk onto the site until the last words spoken by the tour guide. The images of the enslaved on the tourist brochures emphasize the Whitney's perspective, especially in juxtaposition with other plantation marketing materials. The way tour guides frame the Big House entirely from the point of view of the enslaved and the lack of reference to the planter family do not allow visitors to identify with slaveowners. In addition, the

Whitney's refusal to participate in any "good master" narratives allow no mythologizing on its site. While the Whitney could focus more on the connection between slavery and sharecropping, its inclusion of the Antioch Baptist Church provides an interesting and engaging entrance into the topic. This strength will hopefully be continued while the Whitney continues to renovate buildings on its site—few plantations currently allow visitors to enter into overseer's cottages, and it would be interesting to approach that building from the perspective of the enslaved as the Whitney has done at its Big House. In a similar vein, renovating the barn and the pigeonnier to include exhibition material about the experience of more skilled enslaved laborers would allow visitors to understand similarities and differences across kinds of labor for the enslaved. As the Whitney is committed to providing enslaved people the kind of focus that they have historically been denied at other sites, it would be helpful to continue to expand on the buildings and stories included on the site, in order to best provide a complete and thorough glimpse of this important history.

Conclusion

In considering the Whitney Plantation as a museum of slavery, memorial to slavery, and plantation museum, I am interested in how visitors to the Whitney perceive the site, and which project has most affected those who chose to write reviews. I consulted a popular review site, TripAdvisor, in order to identify how visitors view the site. As of April 2018, there were 942 reviews of the Whitney Plantation on TripAdvisor. Reviewers praise the site for its attention to the lives of the enslaved and for its "honest education on slavery." 138 of these reviews refer to the Whitney as a museum of slavery or a slave museum, while 207 focus on the memorials and 139 frame the site as a plantation museum. It is clear from these reviews that visiting the Whitney is a profound experience to most of its visitors, and that people are able to encounter the site how they choose, whether it is the site's focus on the larger history of slavery, the memorials to those enslaved, or in its difference from other plantation museums in the same area. I have focused in this paper on the three different projects at the Whitney, and have mentioned that I think the site would be better served by concentrating its efforts on its role as a plantation museum. However, it is important to consider how other visitors view the site, and to acknowledge that these reviewers have been profoundly moved by their experiences at the Whitney in different but equally valid ways.

Some reviewers seem to notice the three projects at the site, noting that "the Whitney Plantation through exceptional and passionate guides tells the story of slavery in the South and the plantation in specific through what would be best termed a "slavery museum" with memorials to those that served and perished."[77] This reviewer, who posted on TripAdvisor in November 2016, mentions all three aspects of the site, from its role as a "slavery museum" to its

[77] TripAdvisor, "Whitney Plantation."

specific focus on the South and plantation life, to the memorials to the enslaved. These three projects do not necessarily compete; all three perspectives are important and all three provide essential experiences for visitors interested in learning more about the history of slavery or honoring the enslaved. However, it is difficult to do all three projects in the most all-encompassing and accurate way. While the Whitney has recently added more exhibition space, it still has a relatively small amount of space devoted to telling the larger story of American slavery, and does not include many artifacts in its exhibition space to tell the story. While the memorials are powerful and emotionally affecting, the requirement for guided tours and the admission prices mean that these memorials are inaccessible to many, and cannot be the contemplative spaces as mentioned by Toni Morrison in her Bench by the Side of the Road project, referenced in a previous chapter. I believe the Whitney as a reorientation of a plantation tour is its most successful project, especially when compared to other sites in the area. However, this aspect is still a work in progress, as many of the buildings original to the property have not yet been restored and are not accessible to visitors.

It is clear that the Whitney is a young museum, having just opened in 2014. The site's education staff is in the process of creating additional educational materials, and its exhibition spaces continue to grow. Original buildings wait to be renovated and many parts of the property are closed to visitors. As the Whitney continues to mature, it should consider emphasizing its role as a new kind of plantation tour, and renovating the property with this goal in mind. No other plantation in the area is as focused on the lives of the enslaved, and thus visitors choose the Whitney for that perspective, as is evident by the many reviewers who mention how "different" the Whitney is from other plantation tours. This is important too in thinking about what kinds of visitors are coming to the Whitney—many seem to be staying in New Orleans and are interested

in a plantation tour, as is evident by the marketing materials mentioned earlier and by the reviewers who mention having traveled from New Orleans. For those visiting New Orleans, the Whitney offers a much-needed perspective on those who were enslaved just up the river, and whose presence was partly responsible for creating the culture of Louisiana that is so appreciated today. While people interested in the larger history of slavery and African American culture might consider a trip to the National Museum of African American History and Culture or the other museums of slavery mentioned in Fath Ruffins Davis' work, the people choosing to go the Whitney seem to be interested in the specific reality of plantation life for enslaved individuals, and thus this should be the Whitney's focus moving forward.

As the Whitney restores other buildings on the property, the overseer's cottage represents an important opportunity to focus on the specific role of the overseer in plantation life, and on the perspective of the enslaved. Few plantations in the area allow entrance into overseers' cottages, and none have exhibitions focused on the role of the overseer in the plantation hierarchy. This would allow visitors to understand the class differential between the master and the overseer, and to learn more about the day-to-day operations of plantations, information which is not readily available in other museums. In a similar vein, the blacksmith's shop, the greenhouse, and the barn would allow the museum to focus more specifically on the day-to-day experiences of the enslaved. Though the museum currently does a thorough job of explaining the method of growing and processing sugarcane and what an enslaved laborer's experience of this aspect of the plantation would have entailed, it could incorporate more information on other kinds of labor on the plantation. This would allow visitors more understanding on the different kinds of labor required for the enslaved, and provide a more all-encompassing vision of plantation life from the point of view of the enslaved. The Whitney might also consider featuring

more well-known narratives of life on sugar plantations, including Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave*, in order to allow the people who experienced slavery to speak for themselves. Though the Whitney heavily features WPA narratives, incorporating other narratives would provide other important perspectives.

I have now visited the Whitney Plantation on two separate occasions, receiving tours from two different women. Both tours reiterated the mission of the museum, to focus on the lives of the enslaved, and both followed similar trajectories. However, my second visit to the site was guided by an African American woman who mentioned that her ancestors had been enslaved at the Whitney, and that generations of her family have lived near the site. This personal admission was hugely powerful, and made the site's vision more pronounced. Being guided by a black woman who was a direct descendent of those who labored in this area allowed us to understand the site as a total restructuring of a plantation tour, where the perspectives of the enslaved are honored in every aspect of the site, including in terms of those who get to tell the story of slavery. Our tour guide's relationship to the site reminded us that this history is closer than we think, and that its legacies still bear direct implications for the men and women whose ancestors were enslaved. While John Cummings' presence is apparent throughout the site, and both of my tour guides mentioned him continuously throughout the tour, it was the tour guide's personal history that had the most profound effect, and should be prioritized as the site continues to mature. I believe the Whitney should work to hire more African American tour guides from the area, in order to both contribute financially to those whose ancestors were enslaved in the area, and to truly reorient the plantation tour. It was a profoundly moving experience to be able to hear about this history from a local descendent of the enslaved, and I believe it should continue to be part of the Whitney's mission.

When driving out of the Whitney Plantation Museum, there is a large sign on the fence bordering the property. It reads, "FREEDOM EDUCATION FAMILY *PASS IT ON*." The museum asks visitors to "pass on" their experiences at the site, and to urge others to consider the perspective of the enslaved in their understanding of American history. This command contradicts the closing of Toni Morrison's *Beloved,* which ends with the statement, "This is not a story to pass on."[78] It is difficult to pass on my experience of the Whitney, as it is a unique encounter. Walking in the hot, damp sun, feeling my legs grow weary as I listened to story after story of the atrocity of slavery and tried to bear witness to hundreds of years of pain and violence, I felt overwhelmed and exhausted. Morrison asserts that the story of slavery is not one to pass on, and yet her novel remains one of the most powerful efforts to pass on that story in American history. The Whitney asks its visitors to pass on their experiences, but the bodily immersion required of the site is difficult to communicate to others. What I can pass on from the Whitney, however, is its relevance in an ongoing American project of reckoning with the history of slavery. It has taken on a great responsibility, and visitors are clearly moved by their experiences of the site. As many Americans continue to reckon with this history and devise ways to educate ourselves about our collective past, the Whitney Plantation Museum will continue to occupy an important place in our larger national discussion of history and slavery.

[78] Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Knopf, 1987), 324.

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